

Galila Ron-Feder

REDHEAD GANG



The Commander - Hero of the Hospital





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The Adventures of the Redhead Gang

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the adventures of the

**REDHEAD
GANG**

The Commander – Hero of the Hospital

Adama Books

New York

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Introduction

So you won't get all mixed up, and so you'll know who's telling you this story, and what kind of wild ideas he has in his head, and what secret dreams he has, I've decided to give you some important details about myself. Some of these details are public knowledge, and you can talk about them with whomever you like, while others are top-secret, so don't reveal them to anyone (the information marked with a ! is top-secret.)

My Name:

Udi Shahar

My Nickname:

Redhead, since I've got red hair and a million freckles on my face. Nobody calls me "Udi." There are lots of kids who don't even know that I have a regular name; they're positive that Redhead is my only name.

My Age: Eight and a half

My Family:

My father is a doctor, and my mother is a teacher. I've got two brothers. My older brother Yoram reads books all day long and he knows everything. My younger brother Gilly is a big pest. Both of them, you should know, have blond hair. There isn't a single other redhead in my family, not even my aunts and uncles. Just me. Yoram got all the blond hair that came from my father's side of the family, and all the blond hairs from my mother's side of the family were reserved for Gil. No blond hairs were left for me, neither from Mom nor from Dad. Instead I got their freckles, but instead of them being scattered here and there, like theirs, mine are all concentrated on my face. They're so densely packed together that sometimes my whole face looks like one gigantic freckle.

My Most Secret Dream:

To wake up one morning and find that I'm blond and that Gilly and Yoram are redheads. Just imagine that!

My Occupation:

Commander of the Redhead Gang

Necessary Qualities:

A fertile imagination—I've got plenty of that. Leadership qualities—I've got those too. It's a fact, everybody listens to me. And there's another important matter: anyone who wants to lead a gang of kids on adventures has to know how to turn the simplest things into really complicated affairs, because exciting things don't happen in real life the way they do in stories, and if you can't insert some drama from your own imagination, you run the risk of having every day be the same as the next, and all of them boring.

My Friends:

1. Moshik, who came to our neighborhood from Russia.
2. Yifat, a pretty ordinary girl.

3. Sagit, whose mother is a writer, and may write a book about us sometime.
4. Tal, who is Dan's brother.
5. Dan, who is Tal's brother.

My Enemies:

Danna Fishman - a nosy girl with pigtails who annoys everybody. She always follows us and tries to mess up our operations and missions. (It's a good idea to keep your list of enemies secret, so that they won't know that they're your enemies and take the proper precautions.) Besides her, who's my steady enemy, I have different enemies from time to time, whom you'll get to know later on.

Additional Qualities:

1. I never admit mistakes (classified.)
2. I don't always tell the truth, especially when it's boring (classified.)
3. Being redheaded I always tell everyone that being redheaded isn't just the color of your hair, but is part of your character, as well. A redhead is a kid who thinks differently and learns differently and acts differently, and when he does something bad, he doesn't do it because he's bad, but because he's a redhead. Since this is a secret quality, I can't give you an exact explanation.

4. I am very philosophical, and like to think about the basic problems of life.

The Things I Hate the Most:

1. Going to bed the same time every night.
2. Being sick in the middle of an adventure.
3. Convincing kids who can't be convinced that real life can be more interesting than movies on TV or video.

This is all I can tell you about myself.

Chapter One



A Strange Bump in My Stomach

On Sunday morning, at exactly twenty minutes after seven, just when I wanted to roll over and lie on my stomach, I felt this strange bump. At first I was certain that Gilly had left his ping pong ball on my bed. I tried to push the ball away with my hand. But Gilly's ball wasn't there. I didn't find any other toy there either. So I rolled back onto my back, and tried to find the round thing that bothered me when I wanted to sleep on my stomach, but I couldn't find anything. Whatever it was, it had come and gone by itself, as if by magic.

How did I know that it was exactly twenty minutes after seven? When I turned over on my stomach, I looked at Yoram's old watch, which was on the chair next to my table. And why did I look at it? Because I wanted to know how much time I still had to sleep.

I was tired, because we had visitors the night before, and I had gone to bed really late. That wasn't the only reason I was tired. All that week we had been working very hard outdoors. We - I mean Moshik, Yifat, Sagit, Tal, Dan, and myself, the Commander. We had decided that a gang like ours had to have a secret hiding place which we could use all year round, winter and summer. So this week we had been busy building a fortress. We were planning to build it with so many special security measures that nobody could enter without our permission.

Our work day began at eight-thirty each morning. Our rendezvous (that means the place where soldiers or important people meet) was next to the abandoned building, where nobody had lived for a whole year. We were building our fortress in the yard of this house. We had already put in a lot of work, and you could already see that it would be a real fortress. Why am I telling you all this? It's simple - to explain why I looked at the watch at seven-twenty, and how I knew what the exact time was, and why I decided that I still had some time to sleep, and turned over on my stomach.

I couldn't stop thinking about that strange bump which bothered me when I wanted to lie on my stomach and disappeared just as soon as I rolled over onto my back, and I couldn't go back to sleep. Instead of going back to sleep, I sat on the edge of my bed, and searched my sheet and the entire bed once again. I also looked under the bed, to see if Gilly's ball had



rolled under there. When I couldn't find anything, I began to think that something might be wrong with my body. I began to think that the bump was sticking out of my body, and not from the sheet. I got really scared, and chills went up and down my back just from thinking about this.

Gilly woke up right away. He saw me examining myself and not finding anything, and then bending down to look under the bed. He rubbed his eyes with his hands.

"Is it morning already?" he asked me in a kind of fuzzy voice.

"It's been morning for a long time," I said.

"Then why don't you get up?" Gilly asked me.

"Because I'm looking for something," I told him.

"And besides, I can sleep until eight."

He sat up in his bed.

"What are you looking for?" he asked me.

"Your ping-pong ball," I told him. "Maybe you know where it is?"

Gilly gave me a big smile, like he always does when he knows something. He acts like he won some kind of contest. As if we had had a fight and he had beaten me.

"Why do you want my ball?" he asked.

"I don't want it," I said. "I only want to see where it is."

He gave me a suspicious look.

"You're planning something," he said.

"I'm not planning anything," I told him.

"Then why won't you tell me what you need my ball for?" he asked.

I leaned back against the wall. Sometimes, just because I'm the Commander of the Redhead Gang and like adventures, everybody suspects me of all kinds of things. Sometimes I plan something simple, and the person I'm talking to turns it into something complicated. For example, I want a glass of water and I go to Yoram and ask him to bring me a glass of water. Yoram can't imagine that Udi Shahr, the Commander, wants water just because he's thirsty. Right away, he begins to think that I want to splash someone. Then he refuses to give me the water, and demands to know why I want it. I explain to him that I'm thirsty and I just want to drink the water, but he won't believe me, and thinks that I'm lying. This is how Yoram treats me, and this is how Gilly treats me, and this is how Danna Fishman treats me. My problem is that even Moshik treats me like this sometimes, and then it takes me a long time to explain to him that, in addition to being the Commander with imagination and lots of ideas, I also happen to be a normal kid who gets thirsty sometimes and who gets tired sometimes, and adventures and enemies aren't the only things I think about.

"I want to see the ball, because it seemed to me that it got into my bed and then suddenly disappeared," I told Gilly.

Gilly jumped up.

“How did it get into your bed?” he asked angrily. “Did you steal it from me?”

“I didn’t steal it, and I didn’t say that it got into my bed,” I snapped back at him. “I only said that it seemed to me that it was in my bed, that’s all.”

Gilly stared at me. Of course he didn’t believe a single word I said. All of a sudden he ran over to the toy chest and began rummaging around all in a panic, as if he were afraid that thieves had stolen something. Then he found the ball and calmed down.

“Here it is!” he called out.

“Thanks,” I told him, and the bad feeling I had got worse.

“You see, you didn’t manage to take it from me!” Gilly said. He wasn’t aware how dumb he sounded.

“Oh, wow, great for you,” I said.

Then I got up from bed, opened my closet, and looked carefully at myself in the mirror. I still was redheaded, and I still had freckles. I hadn’t changed at all since the last time I had looked at myself in my mirror. My eyes didn’t look like the eyes of someone who had gone crazy. They why had I felt a strange bump in my stomach? If I looked normal, that meant that I wasn’t having illusions, and if I felt something, that meant that it really existed.

I lifted up my pajama top and examined my stomach in the mirror. My stomach is really trim and full of muscles, since I work out every day with all kinds of exercises. I’ve also got a really god tan, since I’m outdoors most of the time, and since we go to the

pool a lot, and sometimes to the beach. I didn't see any bump in the mirror. My stomach was the normal stomach of a boy who is almost nine. The stomach of a boy named Udi, but who is called the Readhead because of his hair.

Gilly kept giving me strange looks.

"Hey," he asked, "have you gone crazy? Why are you rubbing your stomach like that?"

I didn't look directly at him.

"It's none of your business," I told him.

"If you want to know, you're not such a tough guy," Gilly told me, to get me angry. "Yoram is a lot tougher than you are."

"I didn't ask you who's tougher," I told him, "and you don't check out my toughness. If you really want to know, you don't measure toughness by peoples' stomachs. Toughness is a matter of shoulders and the muscles in your arms, and when I'm as old as Yoram, no one will dare to come near me without shaking in his boots." I was angry and I slammed the closet door shut. I took my pajama top and went back to bed.

My clothes were on the chair, next to my bed. I began to put on my shirt. I was sure that Gilly would leave me alone, but I was wrong. Anyone who knows Gilly knows that he's like epoxy glue. When he attaches himself to you, you need a laser beam to get loose.

"Nobody can know what muscles he'll have when he grows up," Gilly told me, "not even you."

"No, I can't," I said, "but the school doctor, who

examined me, told me that I'll be as strong as Rambo. He's really been around. You can rely on what he says."

Of course this was a lie, but Gilly took it all seriously.

"Why did you go to the school doctor?" he asked me. "If your own father is a children's doctor, why do you have to go to other doctors?"

"Because in school they send everybody to the doctor," I said, and to frighten him I added, "and this doctor hurts a lot, and a kid like you will certainly scream your lungs out when he touches you." I took off my pajama bottoms, and bent down to put on the pants which my mother had readied for me on the chair.

And then, all of a sudden, once again I felt this strange bump in my stomach. It was like hocus pocus. I bent over, and my stomach went out like some kind of ball. I stood up straight, and it vanished. I leaned over again, and there it was again, the same ball. I stood up, and it vanished again.

"What's with you?" Gilly asked me, "are you doing exercises?"

To tell you the truth, this strange bump in my stomach really scared me, even though it didn't hurt at all. But I'm not one of those people who show the whole world how frightened they are. I'm the Commander, and the Commander knows how to make good use of situations like this, like bumps in his stomach. So without even having to stop to think,

I told him, "I'm not exercising. I'm performing magic!"

"Magic?" Gilly asked me with his mouth hanging open.

"You want to see?" I asked him.

He nodded. I waved to him to come closer to me. I bent over and let him feel the strange ball that popped up in my stomach. Then I stood up, and let him feel my stomach again. Gilly was really amazed.

"What is that?" he asked. "How do you do that?"

"I swallowed a ping-pong ball," I lied to him, "and now it's in my stomach. And when I want to, I hide it!"

He looked at me, full of admiration, but a little suspiciously too.

"Who taught you how to do this?" he asked.

"A magician," I told him.

"Do Mom and Dad know?" Gilly asked.

"No one knows!" I told him, sounding like a champion. I zipped up my pants and went into the bathroom to wash my face. I left Gilly in our bedroom, surprised and full of admiration for me.

Chapter Two



Udi Shahr - a Real Magician

After I finished brushing my teeth and washing my hands and face, I went into the kitchen to have my orange juice and eat breakfast before going outside, because in our family you can't go outside on an empty stomach. Mom says that breakfast is the most important meal of the day, and I don't argue with her about this, even if I'm not especially hungry. She says that it's important to drink, too, because your body loses liquids during the night, and it's very important to give them back to your body.

I ate quietly and didn't say a word about the strange bump. Actually, I liked this bump, since it gave me millions of ideas. You don't have to guess that I didn't have any intention of hiding it from the members of the Redhead Gang. This was the chance of a lifetime to be special, to be a real hero. Do you think I'd miss out on such an opportunity?

I had already planned what I would do, and I was

a bit impatient. I ate fast and drank fast, and was already down the stairs and out the door before Mom could open her mouth, and I was off to the empty lot. Most of the other kids were already there by the time I arrived. They hadn't waited for me and had begun to work. This is the way it is in the Gang - whoever comes first starts working, and doesn't waste time.

We had a big pile of boards that we had gotten from all kinds of places, and Tal and Dan were already banging nails into them, so we could build the sides of our fortress. Moshik had a pair of pliers, and was pulling out bent and rusty nails from other boards, getting them ready for Tal and Dan. Yifat and Sagit worked with shovels. They were digging a ditch around the fortress. According to our plan, any enemy forces who came near the fortress without permission would fall into this ditch.

Everybody stopped working when I came onto the building site. Moshik wiped the sweat off his face with his shirt.

"What's happening?" he called out to me. "How come you're late?"

"I've got something to show all of you!" I answered. "Something strange happened to me at night. Something magic, like you read about."

"Oh, yeah?" asked Sagit.

"I can show you," I said.

"Show us," Tal said.

I took off my shirt and hung it on one of the fences around the abandoned lot.

"Take a good look," I said, and bent over.

No sooner did I bend over, when the strange bump appeared. I let everyone feel it, so they would know that I wasn't lying to them, and then I straightened up. And when I straightened up, as you've probably guessed, the bump disappeared. And then I bent over again, to convince them that I wasn't lying, and straightened up again. I did this three times until I finally stood up straight and asked:

"Well, what do you think about that?"

Everyone was quiet. Tal immediately took off his shirt and began to bend over and straighten up, but there was no bump in his stomach. Dan tried after him, but nothing happened when he tried either. Then Moshik and the girls tried. Afterwards they all shrugged their shoulders and looked at me in amazement.

"How do you do that?" asked Moshik.

"I don't know," I said, "I think I swallowed a ball."

Moshik laughed.

"You can't swallow a ball that big," he said, "it couldn't get past your throat. And besides, I never heard of anybody thinking he swallowed a ball. If you swallow a ball you have to feel it."

"Alright," I told him, "then I didn't swallow anything."

"Then how do you do it?" Yifat asked.

"It must be that I'm a magician," I answered.

"It's impossible to become a magician just like that, overnight," Sagit declared.



"But it's a fact," I said, "you yourselves saw that I'm the only one who can do that, right?"

"Yes," admitted Dan.

Moshik furrowed his brow.

"Just bwcause we can't do this," he said, "that doesn't mean that other kids can't do it."

"I'm willing to have a test," I said. I'm even ready to give a shekel to anyone who can do it." (The money in Israel is called a "shekel," just like the money in America is a "dollar.")

"On condition that anyone who fails will have to give us a shekel," Yifat added.

"That's right," agreed Dan, "and we'll buy more nails with the money we collect."

"The Redhead Gang will have its own treasury!" Sagit said.

"Let's go!" everyone shouted.

"We've got a magician for a commander!" Yifat cried out.

We left the hammers and the pliers and the shovels in the lot of the empty house, and we went back to my house to look for kids who would be willing to compete with me in magic. The first one we found was Danna Fishman, sitting on the fence with her cousin, with her doll carriage. Sagit went over to her and asked her if she wanted to see magic. At first Danna shook her head and said no. She didn't want to see any magic. But when Sagit asked her over and over again, she finally agreed, even though she didn't believe that the Redhead, Udi Shahr, was capable of

performing real magic.

"Want to bet for a shekel?" Sagit asked her.

"I don't bet for money," Danna told her.

"If you can do what the Redhead does, you'll get the money," Sagit promised her.

"I don't need the Redhead's money!" Danna Fishman said.

Sagit was ready to give up on her and to go search for somebody else who would be willing to bet for money, but I couldn't pass up the opportunity to surprise Danna. So I agreed to forget about the money. I took off my shirt and stood up against the fence and showed Danna the ping-pong ball that I had swallowed. Danna was amazed. Like all the kids in our gang, she tried to make a similar bump in her stomach, but she didn't have any better luck than the members of the Gang. When she couldn't do it, she hurried home and got her brother Yossi, so that he could try, too. She was certain that only boys had bumps like these, and that girls didn't have them.

Yossi Fishman came out into the parking lot with a big smile on his face, and with his nose stuck up in the air.

"What's going on?" he asked, "How is the Redhead trying to do a number on you?"

"He says that he's a magician," Danna said, "he says that he can make all kinds of bumps appear in his stomach, and that no one else can compete with him."

Yossi Fishman laughed.

“Anything that the Redhead can do, I can do,” he declared.

“Are you willing to put up a shekel on that?” Tal asked.

Yossi Fishman screwed up his forehead, like he was seriously considering the proposal.

“Half a shekel,” he said.

“Let’s see your money!” Moshik demanded.

I took half a shekel out of my pocket; actually, this was all the money I had, and Yossi took out a shekel coin, since he didn’t have any change. Then we took off our shirts and I showed Yossi how I could make a bump appear in my stomach, but Yossi couldn’t make any bump appear in his stomach. He tried, and he huffed and puffed, and filled his cheeks with air just like a pig, but he couldn’t do it. His stomach was flat, and didn’t agree to make any bump for him. Yossi straightened up and wiped off all the sweat which had accumulated on his brow from all his efforts.

“I’m sure there’s some kind of trick here,” he said.

“There’s no trick here,” I told him, “I’m willing to swear on it. I’m willing to let you examine my pockets and my mouth, and anything else you want.”

Yossi agreed. He checked out my pockets and didn’t find anything. Then he opened my mouth wide and looked inside, but he didn’t find anything in my mouth either. Then he told me to turn around and I turned around. He finally gave up in the end, and asked me to make the bump once more. If it would

come out this time too, he would give me the half a shekel like we agreed, since he was honest and wouldn't go back on his word.

I bent over once again, Yossi felt my bump, and not having any choice, he gave me his shekel coin and I gave him my fifty agorot change. Then he turned his back on us and went home all nervy. Even his sister Danna didn't dare to follow him. I was sure he blamed her for everything that happened.

Other kids came after Yossi. Some of them agreed to bet for money, and others refused. But no one agreed to bet for a shekel. Only for fifty agorot or seventy-five agorot, tops. We didn't argue with them, because the money wasn't important to me at all. Their respect was more important to me than the money. Everyone respected me. They all treated me like a magician and wanted to know who taught me how to do what I did. They didn't believe me when I told them a magician came to me at night and taught me all kinds of tricks. I told them to have it their way, they could go and figure out how I could do it.

No one could find another explanation. Finally, when Mom called to me to come home to eat lunch, they all had to admit that the Redhead, Udi Shahr, was a genuine magician. Only Moshik couldn't care less:

"The main thing is that we managed to collect ten shkalim for our treasury," he told me.

"You see," I told him with a big smile, "it's all

thanks to my magic.”

“Forget about magic,” Moshik told me, “you can’t pull a fast one like that on me.”

I smiled and said:

“Alright, I don’t intend to pull a fast one on you, but you have to admit that this was magic, after all.”

Chapter Three



Gilly Spoils Everything

Gilly stood in our bedroom with his shirt off, trying to force bumps out of his stomach, but without any success, of course. I went past our room and called out to him from the hall:

"It's no use trying so hard, Gilly. No matter what you do, you won't succeed, and anyways Mom called you to come eat. Didn't you hear her?"

He ran out of the room past me.

"You have to teach me how to do this trick," he said.

"It can't be done," I told him.

"I'll promise you whatever you want," Gilly told me.

"I don't need anything you can promise me," I told him. "I'm a magician, and can get whatever I want with my magic spells...."

He put on his shirt and followed me into the kitchen. Yoram was already sitting at the table and

Mom served us lunch. Gilly was silent. I was silent, too. He didn't take his eyes off me. He followed every movement I made, as if he wanted to see more magic. His staring finally got on my nerves and I kicked him under the table.

"OWW!" Gilly shouted as if I had really hurt him.

"What happened?" Mom asked, all excited.

"He kicked me," Gilly told her.

"He was staring at me all the time as if I were a monkey in the zoo," I said.

"He said that he's a magician!" Gilly said.

My big brother Yoram broke out laughing.

"What else did he say?" he asked, making fun of the whole thing.

"That's all," Gilly said.

"You probably believe every word of his, you ninny," Yoram said.

"I saw with my own eyes how he did it," Gilly said.

"What did he do?" Mom asked.

"He makes a ping-pong ball appear in his stomach," Gilly said, "I saw it with my own eyes."

"If that's so, then maybe you have to get a new set of eyes," Yoram said, sure of himself.

His being so sure about everything made me so angry that I couldn't stand it any longer. I stood up, took my T-shirt off, and stood like that, bare from the waist up, facing Yoram.

"I can prove it to you, if you don't believe me," I said.

"Go right ahead," Yoram said to me.

“You have to pay me a shekel if I can do it!” I said, since I wanted to teach him a lesson, once and for all.

“Even two,” Yoram said.

“You’re all witnesses,” I said, “two shekels!” I immediately bent over and showed Yoram the strange bump that came out of my stomach. Yoram turned white.

“MOM!” he called to Mom, who had just gone into the kitchen, since she didn’t want to interfere in our games. “Come here, quick! Look what Udi has!”

“Leave Mom out of this,” I got mad at him and immediately straightened up. The bump vanished as if it had never existed. “I want the money you owe me.”

“You don’t deserve any money,” Yoram said, “you’re just sick, something’s wrong with your stomach.”

“You said two shkalim,” I reminded him, “and I never said that there wasn’t anything wrong with my stomach. We talked about a bump that sticks out of my stomach, and it doesn’t matter whether it’s OK or not.”

Mom came back from the workbench, all afluster.

“What happened?” she asked.

“There’s something wrong with Udi’s stomach,” Yoram said. “There’s something inside his stomach.”

Mom looked at me and put the salad bowl on the table.

“Show me,” she said, and came over towards me.

"I'm not showing anything until Yoram pays me," I insisted. "You were a witness to what he said. If a bump came out of my stomach, he had to pay two shkalim."

"He cheated," Yoram said, "he wasn't being honest with me."

"I didn't cheat!" I got mad. "Gilly ruined everything. He told you that I was a magician. I didn't say a word about it, and I didn't intend to show it to you at all. You made me do it, because you said that Gilly had to get a new set of eyes."

Mom put her hand on my shoulder.

"Yoram will pay you the two shkalim," she said, "I'll make sure of that. Now show me the bump you have in your stomach."

She had almost persuaded me to show her, but I changed my mind right away.

"I didn't want you to pay me from your money," I said. "I want Yoram to pay from his money."

"Yoram will pay you from his money," Mom promised. "I'll see to that."

I didn't have any choice now. I didn't want to, but I bent over and showed Mom the bump that came out of my stomach. Mom felt it and her face went white. Then she felt it again, and I knew that something terrible was about to happen. Gilly had spoiled everything for me. If he hadn't opened his big mouth, I could have gone around with my bump all the time and shown it to everyone, and told them that I'm a magician. But now that Mom already knows,



what will happen?

She stood up and gave me a worried look.

"I have to call Father," she said.

"There's something the matter with him, isn't there?" Yoram asked.

"I don't know," Mom said, "I'm not a doctor. The doctor will have to see him and decide what it is." She left the table and hurried over to the phone to call the hospital where Dad works. Gilly pushed his plate away.

"I don't understand what's going on here," he said to Yoram. "Is he or isn't he a magician?"

"He's not a magician," Yoram told him, "he's sick."

"You're the sick one," I told him, "how can I be sick if I feel OK, and nothing hurts, and I don't have fever, and I'm in such a good mood?"

Yoram laughed.

"You've got another kind of illness," he said, "without fever, and without pain, and without anything, just with a bump in your stomach."

"How do you know?" I asked him. "Since when are you a doctor?"

"You want to bet for two shkalim?" Yoram asked me slyly, positive that he could pull a fast one on me, but I refused. Why should I let him think that we were even? If I won in our earlier bet, why should I lose what I had won? And besides, I'm no fool. I understood that something was the matter with me. I knew that no magician had come to me in the

middle of the night to teach me how to do magic. And I hadn't swallowed any ping-pong ball either. Something had gotten mixed up in my stomach, that was all.

Mom finally succeeded in getting Dad on the telephone and told him what had happened. I don't know what Dad told her, since I didn't hear his voice on the telephone, but I understood from what Mom said that he wanted a doctor to examine me. Why not Dad himself? That's the way it always was. Whenever we're sick, he sends us to another doctor, just to be on the safe side.

I waited patiently until she finished talking on the telephone and came back to us. And then she said:

"We're going to the hospital at four o'clock."

Gilly, who always gets excited whenever anybody mentions the word "hospital," immediately said:

"I hope the Redhead isn't going to die."

I smiled the smile of a hero who laughs at hospitals and doctors.

"Don't worry," I told him, "you won't get rid of me so fast," and then I left the table and went to my room to be afraid by myself, without anybody seeing me.

Chapter Four



I Have a Rupture in My Stomach, and the Doctor Says They Have to Operate on Me

If you think that it's so great to go to the hospital for an examination when you have a bump in your stomach, you're wrong. It's definitely not pleasant, and even a little frightening. But if you think that it's so scary so that you start to cry or scream or refuse to go, then you're wrong again. It's definitely not that bad. But if you're not afraid at all, then you don't have anything to be brave about, and if you don't try hard to be brave, then you don't get a prize from your parents. So, in my opinion, it's best to show your parents that you're really afraid a lot, and almost refuse to go to be examined, and then, in order to persuade you, your parents say that if you're brave and overcome your fears and behave nicely, then you'll get a prize. If the word "prize" is enough for

you, because you rely on your parents to get you a big, expensive present, then you can start being brave at this point in time (as grownups would say) and say that you're willing to go. But if you don't rely on your parents, then this is the time to ask what prize they're talking about. I don't have to tell you that ice cream is not a suitable prize. Not even a toy that runs on batteries. If it's got a digital display, then the whole affair begins to be worth your while.

This is exactly what I did. At the beginning, when I left the house with Mom, I told her that I wasn't willing, under any circumstances, to go to the hospital to be examined. I feel good and I have my usual appetite and nothing hurts me. And besides, I'm the Commander of the Redhead Gang, which is building a fortress now, and I'm responsible. I can't leave my troops just like that, by themselves. They won't know where to hammer in the nails or where to dig the trench. And anyways, why go to the hospital at all? The thought hadn't even crossed her mind this morning when I woke up.

Mom gave me one of her Motherly looks.

"Are you afraid?" she asked.

"Of course," I said, "who isn't afraid of the doctor in the hospital?"

She hugged me, as if she could squeeze the fear away.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," she told me, "he won't hurt you, and Father promised to be there when the doctor examines you."

“Dad can’t help me,” I said, as I took pity on myself. “I’m not going to any doctor.”

“Don’t worry, Udi,” Mom said to me, “I promise you that he won’t hurt you. I promise you that I won’t let him hurt you. You do trust me, don’t you?”

“I trust you,” I said, “but how do you know that he won’t hurt me? Did you ever have a bump in your stomach when you were nine years old, so that you know that it doesn’t hurt when they examine you?”

Mom began to despair. We were standing at the bus stop, and I said I wouldn’t get on the bus, because I was afraid and I didn’t trust anybody. I think that at the beginning she was certain that she could finish the entire deal without any present, but when we could see the bus coming down the street, she knew that this wouldn’t be as easy as she thought, so she surrendered, because there weren’t any other options (as military commanders say.)

“Alright,” she said, “if you behave nicely and overcome your fears, and let the doctor examine you, then I promise to give you a prize.

“A prize?” I almost sneered, “what kind of prize?”

“Whatever you want,” Mom said.

“With a digital display?” I asked, since the bus had already stopped for us.

“With a digital display,” Mom said, “whatever you choose, just so long as you behave nicely.”

It worked perfectly. I got into the bus and sat down next to the window. I sat quietly, just like a good soldier. Even when we sat in the waiting room for the

doctor I didn't run away or tremble. Really, what is a doctor, after all? I know that a doctor is just a human being, since my Dad is a doctor too. At the very worst, he'll hurt me a little, but that doesn't matter when we're talking about a laser gun with a digital display and remote control. Chuck would turn green with envy. So would Larry and Dan. They couldn't even imagine that I was sitting in the hospital waiting room without being afraid. But I'll tell them all about this, and they'll be proud of me. Just like soldiers whose commander is wounded on the battlefield, and bites his lips so he won't scream.

What a tremendous idea! Redhead Shahar, the commander of troops, wounded in action!

A stroke of genius! Who pays any attention to a bump in his stomach when he can imagine that this is an injury on the battlefield?

I smiled to myself. When you've got a good imagination you can do anything with it. Look, in a flash, I feel completely different. In a flash I feel like a soldier who's just come back from the battlefield. And all the people around me are looking at me with this kind of respect, as if I had done a really courageous act. They know that I saved the country in the war, but I was wounded, and now the doctor has to examine me and treat me.

A nurse came out of one of the rooms and told Mom and me to go in. We went in. A doctor in a white coat greeted us with a smile. Dad was sitting there in the small room too. The doctor asked me in

a pleasant voice what my name was, and I answered him in a soldier's voice. Then he asked me some more personal questions, and finally, when he ran out of questions, he asked me to get up on the table, and then he examined my stomach.

I was so absorbed in my imaginary adventures that I didn't feel any pain, just a little pressure. All the time I thought about the soldiers I had left behind on the battlefield, who were building the fortress. Dad looked at the doctor, the doctor looked at Dad, and Mom looked at both of them. They said something to each other, but I didn't understand a single word. All the time I was planning how I would tell my soldiers about my wound. How I would prepare them for the possibility that I might be crippled in a wheelchair, or something like that. What could I do? That's the fate of those who are willing to give their lives for their country.

Until the doctor, whose name, by the way, is Doctor Har-Even, said;

"Yes, there's no doubt that this is a rupture. There's a small tear in the peritoneum."

I looked at him and I didn't understand a single word that he said.

"You can get down from the table, Udi," he said.

I got off the table. Dad pulled me towards him and hugged me as if I was a little baby. Talking like a nursery school teacher, he explained to me that I would have to have an operation. Why an operation? Because everybody's internal organs are covered with



a kind of membrane (that's a fancy word for something like skin) that's called the peritoneum (I looked it up in the dictionary so I could spell it right,) and mine was torn a little bit. How did they know that it was torn? That's simple. The strange bump that came out of my stomach was part of my intestines, and since this thing like skin was torn, they stuck out when I bent over. What would they do in the operation? They would sew up my peritoneum just like you sew up any tear, and after they sewed it up, I would go back to being like all the other kids, and I could play all kinds of sports and I could bend over without anything sticking out of my stomach.

I sat on Dad's lap like a dummy and didn't say a word. I wanted to ask the doctor if this operation that I had to have is an operation that soldiers have too, but I kept quiet and didn't ask, because I knew they wouldn't understand what I was talking about. Dad asked him when I should have the operation. The doctor opened up the calendar which was on his desk. Then they started talking about dates. When they finished, Doctor Har-Even patted me on the head.

"I see that you are a very brave boy," he said.

"Yes," I said, and immediately got off Dad's lap, since brave children don't sit like babies on their father's laps. "I'm the Commander."

"The Commander?" Doctor Har-Even asked.

"The Commander of the Redhead Gang," I told him. "We have a gang on our block, and I'm its commander."

He smiled.

"I must admit, until now I've never had the privilege of operating on a commander," he said, "I think that this is a great honor."

"You can rely on me not to make trouble," I said.

Doctor Har-Even extended his hand to shake mine, and I extended my hand to shake his. We shook hands like two men, and Mom and Dad smiled. Then he walked with us to the door, and said:

"Monday morning, eight a.m."

"We'll be there," Dad said.

"See you!" Doctor Har-Even called out after me.

"See you!" I called back.

Chapter Five



“If You’ve Got a Cut, Why Don’t they Put a Bandage on It?”

When we were outside, Mom said:

“I must say, you acted like a real hero.”

Dad looked at her, pulled me towards him, and smiled at her.

“I always told you that Udi never gives us any problems,” he said, “I always told you that he’s no coward.”

I stood between Mom and Dad and all of a sudden I had this feeling that they were about to pull a fast one on me. Because if I’m naturally not a coward, then this means that I don’t deserve a prize for good behavior. On the other hand, if I am a coward but managed to control myself, then I deserve a big prize. Then which is better? To give up the prize to keep my reputation as a hero, or to give up my reputation

to get the prize? I think that I can put aside the hero act for a while, because I can always go back to being a hero. On the other hand, if I give up on the prize now, I'll never get it. So I said:

"Don't think that this was so easy, Dad." I tried to make my voice sound weak, like someone sick who's about to have an operation. "I wanted to cry four times because it hurt and I was afraid, but I controlled myself."

Dad stopped.

"He hurt you?" he asked.

"He sure did," I said, "I promised Mom that I wouldn't scream and she promised me a prize. That's why I controlled myself."

"You really are a hero of a Commander," he said, ending the conversation. He announced to Mom and me that we were all driving to a toy store in order to buy me the present I had been promised.

We got into Dad's car and we drove to a toy store downtown. Once we entered the store, Mom and Dad let me choose whatever I wanted. I picked a tank with a laser gun and remote control. It cost a lot of money, but Dad didn't say a word. After all, it isn't every day that your average nine-year-old goes into the hospital for an operation, and doesn't scream when the doctors examine him.

Then we went across the street and had ice cream sundaes. I had a double sundae, but Mom didn't tell me that this was too much or that I'd have a stomachache or anything like that. What can I tell

you, having to have an operation has its advantages. It isn't the greatest thing in the world, but it gives you all kinds of privileges that I generally don't get.

We finished our ice cream and drove home. Gilly and Yoram were both waiting for us impatiently. They were worried and wanted to know what the doctor said. They both cared about me, as if we had never had fights, and as if we were the most loving brothers in the whole world.

"I'm going to have an operation," I announced for all the world to hear, and I started to remove the string from the box which contained my new tank, "a stomach operation."

"An operation?" Gilly asked, all excited, "a real operation? They're really going to cut you open?"

"Yes," I said, "an operation like the ones they do for soldiers who are injured in battle."

"Forget about your soldiers," Yoram told me, "what did the doctor tell you? What kind of operation will it be?"

"An operation for a cut membrane," I said.

Gilly looked at me with a strange look. He examined me from head to toe, as if he were looking at me for the first time in his life.

"Cut?" he asked.

"Exactly," I told him.

"When did you fall and cut something?" he asked.

"I didn't fall," I told him. "This is a different kind of cut. Not the kind you get from falling."

He looked confused.



"I never in my entire life heard of such a cut," he said, "and besides, if you've got a cut, why don't they just put a bandage on it? Why do they have to operate on you?"

I took the wrapping off the box from my tank.

"I already explained it to you," I said to Gilly, "this is another kind of cut. Not the kind that you know. It's a cut that soldiers get."

Yoram laughed out loud.

"This isn't a cut that soldiers get. It's an internal cut. This isn't like a cut finger or leg, it's another kind of cut, and they have to operate to treat it." He turned from Gilly to me. "When are they operating on you?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "The doctor said on Monday."

"Which Monday?" Yoram asked.

"I don't know," I said, "I didn't ask him."

"I'm going to ask Dad," Yoram said. He turned around and left the room.

Only Gilly and I were left in the room. I opened the box, took out my tank, and made it operational. Gilly turned green with envy. He followed the tank as it went around the room, and asked my permission to operate it for a while. I didn't let him. Why should I let him? Did he deserve it? Was he about to undergo an operation for a rupture? Was he the one who didn't open his mouth when the doctor examined him?

Gilly wasn't hurt by my refusal. He was still in a

state of shock from what I had told him, and he couldn't decide what was the truth and what wasn't.

"Tell me," he said, "is this cut of yours really a cut that soldiers get?"

"Of course it is," I told him.

"But you're not a soldier," Gilly told me, "so how could that be?"

"That's the way it is," I said. "I may not be a soldier who wears an IDF uniform, but I'm another kind of soldier, and I was wounded in action." (The IDF is the Israel Defense Forces. That's the official name of the Israeli army.)

"Where were you wounded?" Gilly asked.

"In battle," I said.

"I didn't know that you took part in any battle," he said.

"Of course you didn't know," I said, "it was a military secret."

He started biting his lips and I could see that he was really starting to short-circuit. Then he got up from his bed, came over to me, grabbed my shirt, and shouted:

"Alright, already! Tell me the truth!"

"I'm telling the truth," I told him.

"You're making it up," Gilly accused me.

"You can even ask the doctor who's going to operate on me," I told him, "even he'll tell you that I am the commander of troops. If this weren't so, then how could I get a rupture like this? Then how come they have to operate on me?"

Gilly looked disappointed. He was certain that he could force the truth from me, and here he saw that he was wrong. Still angry, he strode out of the room and went to ask Dad about the whole business of my rupture and the operation I had to undergo. Believe it or not, Dad backed me up. Of course, he didn't say that I had been injured on the battlefield, and that this battle was a military secret, but he didn't say anything else. All he said was:

"Ask Udi. You can rely on what he says, he's the one who's about to undergo the operation, not me." Gilly didn't have any choice then, he just had to believe me.

Do you know why Dad answered Gilly the way he did, and why he didn't immediately say that I was talking nonsense? Because he knew that if he didn't back me up now, I could still refuse to enter the hospital for the operation, and besides, he thought to himself, if instead of being afraid and crying, Udi makes up stories that calm him and make him happy, then why should I spoil this? This is what my Dad thought, and I can tell you that he was right. Because if I had refused to go to the hospital, it wouldn't have been terrible just for me, but for Mom and Dad too.

Chapter Six



Nighttime Thoughts

This is what I thought to myself at night: here I am, Redhead Shahr, about to enter the hospital to undergo an operation. Dad said that this was a simple operation, and that there was no reason for me to be afraid. This was a simple operation, just as simple as sewing up a piece of cloth that was torn. Since I believe Dad, I'm not afraid. If I'm not afraid of the operation, then this means that the operation will be fun. I'll be a hero, and everyone will worry about me. They'll buy me additional presents, besides the one they already bought me, and they'll spoil me, like they never spoiled me before. And besides, everyone will look up to me, because none of my friends ever underwent an operation in their lives. Not Moshik, not Yifat, not Sagit, and not Tal or Dan. Even Danna Fishman never had an operation in her whole life.

Is this fair? Is it fair that I'll be the only one to have fun, while all my friends sit at home bored? Is it nice

for the Commander to leave his soldiers at the rear, and set out for the front by himself? Is this how a good commander acts?

No! This certainly wasn't fair. If I care about my friends, I have to include them in this experience. I have to give them a chance to enter the hospital. I have to give them a role to play in this adventure, and not to leave them by the side, like junk to be thrown out.

What role would I give them?

Let's imagine that I really am a commander who has been wounded in battle, and they really are my soldiers. It isn't hard to imagine what would happen then. Here comes the helicopter to evacuate me from the battlefield. The soldiers put me on a stretcher and carry me to the helicopter. Then they wave to me and cry. What will they do now without me? Who will give them orders?

I can see the tears in their eyes for me, and I raise myself up a bit, despite the internal rupture that I have in my stomach that hurts terribly, and I have this enormous bulge when I raise myself up.

"Don't worry, men," I tell them, "I'll return to you in a day or two!"

"Don't pay any attention to him!" the medic says. "He'll have to stay in the hospital for several weeks!"

"You know what I think about hospitals!" I tell them as the strength drains out of me. "If the doctors don't get me out of there soon, then you'll have to organize a rescue mission and take me out of there



by force!”

Moshik, my soldier, smiles, and the tears in his eyes immediately dry up.

“Everything will be OK, sir!” he says.

“Put Plan Number Two into operation!” I tell him.

“You can rely on us, sir,” he says.

The medics are lifting me on the stretcher into the helicopter, and the helicopter takes off. I try to explain to them that I can't stay in the hospital for such a long period, but this does not concern them, and in general they don't care what I can and cannot do. They set me down on the heliport in the hospital, they operate on me that very same day, and the next day my soldiers crash through the guardposts of the hospital and release me, all according to the plan that I had prepared in advance, which I called Plan Number Two.

That's it.

I smiled to myself in the darkness because these nighttime thoughts of mine had already given me an idea. Gilly was asleep on the small bed opposite mine, snoring a little because he had a runny nose. What a fantastic idea! Tomorrow morning I'll gather together all the members of the Gang and tell them everything. Their mission will be to smuggle me out of the hospital after the operation and to bring me back home, as if I really were a commander of soldiers, and as if my soldiers really couldn't manage without me, because if I'm not around, there's nobody else who can give them orders.

What will we get out of all this? First of all, everyone will have fun, and not just me. In the second place, the kids will think that I worry about them, and not just about myself. In the third place, they won't have to take pity on me, because if they don't come to the hospital and don't do anything to save me from the clutches of the doctors, then they'll think all the time that I'm suffering, and if I suffer, then they have to take pity on me. And last of all: no one will take over the Gang in my absence, which has happened many times. Because when the Commander is away, this is a golden opportunity to conduct subversive activities and steal his position. But if I continue to direct the operation by remote control, and they don't stop thinking about me, then everything will be all right. I will continue to be the Commander, and no one will take advantage of my absence.

I was so excited by the idea that popped into my head that I completely forgot that it was nighttime. I got up, put the light on, and began to write out the operational plan. Gilly woke up immediately.

"What are you doing?" he asked me.

"Writing," I said.

"Is it already morning?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"Then why are you up?" Gilly asked.

"Because I have several important things to write down," I told him.

He jumped out of bed and came over to me.

“Are you writing your will?” he asked.

“A will?” I shouted back at him, “are you crazy? What, am I some kind of old person who’s going to die and has to write a will?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“No,” he said, “you aren’t an old person, but I thought maybe ... I thought maybe you’re afraid to go to the hospital. Maybe you’re afraid that you’ll die during the operation. Yoram told me once that you can even die during an operation!”

I looked at him, and suddenly I lost all interest in my plan. I started to think that if Yoram said so, he must know. And I’ll really die there on the operating table, before Moshik, Sagit, Yifat, Tal, and Dan would be able to liberate me. Nevertheless, I said to him:

“Yoram is an idiot. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about at all.” I shut off the light and pushed Gilly towards his bed, and then I got into my bed. But now I couldn’t sleep because I was so scared. That idiot Yoram! It was all his fault. If he hadn’t opened his big mouth, I would have continued planning the escape plan, and wouldn’t dream that I was going to die like that, on the operating table.

Chapter Seven



Operational Plan Number Two to Free the Wounded Commander

All my fears disappeared in the morning. As soon as I got out of bed they all vanished as if they had never existed. All of a sudden they seemed to be so stupid. Me die during the operation? Who says I'm going to die at all? My father is a doctor, and he knows what's dangerous and what's safe. And if he decides that I can undergo this operation, that means that nobody dies from an operation like this. He wouldn't want to kill his own son. And if he wanted to, then why did he go and buy me such an expensive present?

I was in a great mood when I ate breakfast. Then I went outside. This time the other kids weren't waiting for me outside the fortress we're building. I beat them by a few minutes. I sat down on a cement block and waited. While I was waiting I planned

exactly how I would tell them about my operation, and how to explain to each one his role in the military operation.

I waited and waited, but nobody showed up. A lot of time had gone by already, and I began to worry. Did something happen yesterday when I was at the doctor's? Were they planning a revolt against me?

Sometimes, when I'm away from home for a day or two, I get this strange feeling, that when I return, the other kids won't want me any more. Then when I come back, I realize that this was dumb, but I still don't learn from experience, and when I go on a trip again, I start worrying again.

I got up from the concrete block I was sitting on and started walking home. When I got near the building, I heard Sagit's voice. Then I saw her and Larry and Dan, and Moshik, and Yifat. They were all sitting on the fence and waiting. When they saw me, Sagit jumped up and ran towards me.

"You know that we're looking for you," she said.

"And I waited for you at our usual meeting place," I said.

Moshik looked me over from head to toe.

"Are you OK?" he asked.

"Sure," I said, "why shouldn't I be OK?"

"Because Gilly told us that you were wounded," Moshik explained. "He said that you were wounded and that you had a cut."

"I really do have a cut," I said.

"Where?" Sagit asked.



"In my stomach," I said.

"And they're really going to put you in the hospital and operate on you?" Yifat asked.

"That's right," I told her.

The whole gang looked at me even more respectfully than usual.

Larry asked, "And you're not afraid?"

"Me?" I laughed. "Do I look like someone who's afraid?"

Larry shook his head. They stared at me, and couldn't take their eyes off of me, as if they were looking at some kind of special hero. Finally Sagit asked me:

"How long are you going to be in the hospital?"

The truth is that no one had told me for how long. Dad hadn't told me, and Doctor Berg hadn't told me. Mom had hinted that it would only be for a short time, and I didn't ask her how short a time. Was this one day? Two days? Half a day? Why should I ask when they plan to release me, if I planned to have the members of the Gang liberate me?

"I think they're putting me in the hospital for ten days," I said, "or maybe twenty days."

Yifat got all excited. "Why so long?"

I waited and then gave them all a wink.

"Not exactly," I said.

"What do you mean, not exactly?" Dan demanded.

"That means that I plan to leave early," I replied.

Now Moshik got all excited: "Are you planning to

run away from the hospital?"

I shook my head no.

"The plan is for you to break me out of there," I said, "the plan is for you to carry out a real military operation and rescue me from the doctors."

All the gang members fell silent. Sagit looked at Moshik, Moshik looked at Larry, Larry looked at Dan, and Dan looked at Yifat. I think I astounded them, and that they were confused by this sudden idea, and not only confused. I was sure that they were excited too, because never in their whole lives had they had an opportunity to carry out a real rescue mission.

Moshik was the first one who moved. He took his hands out of his pockets and asked:

"Do you want us to break into the hospital and grab you?"

"Exactly," I answered.

"What if you won't be able to stand up," Larry asked, "what if you will be too weak?"

I smiled.

"Do I look weak to you?" I asked.

"You might be weak after the operation," Larry said.

"And besides, they might have you attached to all kinds of tubes," Sagit said. "In the movies you see people after operations and they've always got tubes attached to them. How can we take the tubes out and smuggle you outside?"

"And what if you die on us on the way?" Yifat asked.

I raised my hand as a sign that I wanted quiet, and I promised them in a calm voice that I wouldn't be attached to any tubes, and I wouldn't be weak and I wouldn't die on the way. If the doctors were planning to connect me to any tubes, my father would have already told me. If the doctors were planning on making me so weak that I wouldn't be able to stand on my own two feet, my parents would have prepared me for this. But the operation which I was about to undergo was a completely different kind of operation. Without tubes, and without dying, and without weakness. This is a soldiers' operation, and soldiers want to return to the front lines and fight. They don't have the time to just lie in a hospital bed and be spoiled. This was the first thing. I explained to them that the second part of this doesn't depend on me. It depends on them. But if they are afraid and don't care if they abandon me, and it doesn't bother them that I'll lie in a hospital bed like some soft kid, that's different. Then I'll have to turn to other kids, who are a bit more daring, and who would be ready to carry out Operational Plan Number Two to rescue the wounded Commander.

"That's all there is to it," I ended my speech, "now you have to decide."

They all gave me confused looks.

Sagit asked, "What's this 'Operational Plan Number Two to rescue the wounded Commander?'"

"This is the plan according to which you will have to act," I told her.

Dan's eyes lit up as he asked, "There's a plan?"

"There is," I said.

"I agree!" said Dan.

"So do I!" Larry shouted.

"If it won't be dangerous to take you out of the hospital, and if your parents or the doctors won't make trouble afterwards, then I'm ready too," said Moshik.

"And what about you two?" I asked Yifat and Sagit.

"I was ready from the start," Yifat declared.

"So am I," Sagit added.

Now that they were all convinced that they couldn't abandon me in the hospital, I briefed them on the details of the plan. First of all, they would have to meet at the hospital and sneak into the children's ward. This was Stage I of the plan. In Stage II, Dan would have to pretend that he was sick himself. In order to do this, he would have to come with a big bandage on his leg. He wouldn't have any problems in entering the hospital, because he would tell the guard at the gate that he had an appointment with the doctor, so the doctor could remove the bandage. Dan would hide clothes for me under his shirt, and he would give me the clothes when he arrived at my room. I would take the clothes, go into the bathroom, take off my pajamas, and put on my regular clothes. In the meantime Dan would remove his bandage. Then I would come out of the bathroom, and I would start to walk towards the elevator. Dan would join

me. The other Gang members would stay on guard in the hall, and warn me if one of the nurses were to spot me. If they saw that she were to pay attention to me, or if she noticed something out of the ordinary, their task was to warn me. They would give a secret signal or whistle, or make some other noise.

"Is everything clear?" I asked when I finished the briefing.

"The Special Operations Branch of the CIA would have to work for a month to come up with such a great plan," Sagit said.

"I never had to kidnap a casualty in my whole life," Yifat said.

"My parents will kill me if they hear about this," Moshik said.

I crossed my arms behind my back in a military pose, like a wise and high-ranking officer.

"No one will know who kidnapped me," I promised. "If my parents insist on knowing how I arrived home, I'll tell them that I escaped on my own."

"But what if they don't believe you?" insisted Yifat.

"They'll have to believe me," I told her, "even if they don't want to, they'll have to believe a child who has undergone an operation. That's the way it is. No one can get angry at a nine-year-old who's undergone an operation."

Now that I had dispelled the fears of my soldiers (that's what the army training manuals say to do,) I

went over the details of the plan a second time, and I made sure that each one knew just what his or her mission was. Then we agreed that we would make our escape in a taxi. Each one would bring a certain amount of money from his allowance, and together we would have enough money for the fare home. Besides, we also had the money from my magic. Instead of buying nails with this money, we could pay for the taxi with it.

What else was left? I only had to inform them of the date of the operation; the plan would be carried out on the day after the operation, because I might really not feel well on the same day as the operation. In addition, I would have to give Dan the clothes he would be bringing to the hospital. Since I don't believe in putting off till tomorrow what you can do today, especially concerning operational plans, Dan came into the house with me and I gave him a pair of pants, a shirt, and underwear, just to be on the safe side. Later, after he had gone, I felt terrific. As if I really didn't want to miss out on the operation.

Chapter Eight



I Go for Tests and Come Back the Same Day

At noon on Sunday Mom told me that the next day, Monday morning, I would be going to the hospital. We were sitting around the table and eating lunch then. Her voice shook when she told me. I think she was very afraid of how I would react. I think this was why she didn't tell me a few days earlier when I would be entering the hospital, because she was sure that I would be frightened, and she wanted to spare me several days of being scared.

I didn't respond. I ate as fast as possible, and as soon as I had finished eating I jumped up and ran outside, to tell Moshik. Even with all my preparations, an operation like my rescue plan needs a certain amount of time before T-hour. If it had to be put into operation the day after tomorrow, then the members of the Gang had to begin their

preparations for action.

I ran out of the house as if my clothes were on fire, with Mom running after me. She was certain I was trying to run away, so I wouldn't have to go to the hospital tomorrow. When she got to the door of our house, I was already next to the door of Moshik's house, and when she called out, "Udi, where are you running to?" Moshik had already opened the door for me.

"Udi!" she shouted, "Come home immediately!"

"What happened?" Moshik asked.

I told him, "Tomorrow!" since secret messages have to be given in shorthand. "Tomorrow I'm going in."

"I'll pass the message along," he promised, "you'll see that everything will be OK."

"I'm coming right now," I called out to Mom.

I went home and calmed Mom down. I explained my suddenly jumping up by telling her that I had simply forgotten to give something to Moshik, and I didn't want to delay this. Mom smiled at me. You just can't believe how an operation gives a kid so many points. Can you believe whole days with nobody getting angry at me? Can you believe whole days with everybody just smiling at me?

The next morning, I didn't have my orange juice and I didn't eat any breakfast. Without me having a single bite to eat, Mom and Dad drove me to the hospital. On the way, Dad told me that they were going to take some of my blood. This would only be

a little sting, he told me, and that would be all. And if I wouldn't make any problems and wouldn't shout and wouldn't cause a ruckus and let the doctor do what he had to, then of course I would get a prize. And when I asked Dad what prize, he said:

"Whatever prize you want!"

I could already imagine the airplane I would get. This airplane also would be remotely controlled. And if they would have to take blood from me again, then I would get a boat as well. A little sting, Dad had said. What a laugh. Who's afraid of a little sting, when he's about to get an airplane with remote control? And anyways, who's afraid of stings? You just close your eyes and imagine you're being stung by a mosquito. I had already been stung by mosquitoes hundreds of times in my life, and it didn't hurt at all.

Doctor Har-Even was waiting for us in his room, and when he saw me, he called out, "Here's our heroic Commander!"

I smiled at him, and said hello.

Doctor Har-Even asked me how my soldiers were, and then he took me into his room and began to examine me. He checked my lungs and my pulse, took my temperature, and all kinds of things like that. At the end he told me to hold out my hand, and he took some blood.

This wasn't the greatest thing in the world, but it didn't hurt so much, either. Doctor Har-Even patted me on the head and said that I really was a hero because I didn't make any trouble. I winked at Dad.



I told him, "That was because of the prize I'm getting when we leave here."

"You can already get your prize now," Doctor Har-Even told me.

"But I have to choose what I want," I told him. I was certain that he was going to send Dad to buy my present for me.

"You can go with your father to choose," Doctor Har-Even said.

I looked at him, amazed.

"I don't understand," I blurted out, "you're not going to operate on me?"

"We certainly are going to operate on you," the doctor answered me, "but the operation is going to be performed tomorrow. First we have to receive the results of the tests."

"You mean, I'm not going to stay here now?" I asked.

"No," Doctor Har-Even said, "you can go home."

What a letdown! Here I was certain that they were going to give me a bed and pajamas and take me into the operating room and get it over with. And now I have to wait until tomorrow. And what about the members of the Gang? They must be all excited, planning everything for tomorrow morning. How will they react when they see me going home? Will they believe what I tell them, or will they think that I just made up the entire operation, and that they're not going to perform an operation on me at all?

All at once I lost all interest in going to choose a

remote-controlled airplane. Outside, when Dad asked me whether we should go to the store, I immediately answered, "Not now."

"Why not?" he asked, unable to hide his surprise.

"Because I'd rather buy all the prizes together, at one time," I said.

"What prizes are you talking about?" Dad asked me.

"All the prizes that'll be coming to me after I behave like a hero in the hospital," I told him, and waited.

Mom and Dad took a quick look at each other.

"You don't get a prize for everything, Udi," Mom told me.

"I know," I said, "but if I behave well during the operation, won't you give me a prize? And if I lie in bed like a good boy and don't act wildly, won't you give me a prize?"

I think that they concluded that the whole business with prizes had been a mistake. I think that they felt that I was beginning to hold them up, and they didn't like this. But sometimes even parents are too late, and when we left the hospital, it was already too late for them to change their minds about the whole idea of prizes.

The truth is that I didn't want to buy the airplane now, because I had to tell Moshik of the change in plans, and I was afraid I wouldn't have enough time. But I changed my mind once we got into the car, because it suddenly occurred to me that after Mom

and Dad learn that I escaped from the hospital, Mom and Dad might punish me, and cancel the whole business of prizes. So I stretched out my hand and tapped Dad on the shoulder, and said:

"You know what? Let's go to the store and buy me my prize."

"Fine," Dad said.

We went to the toy store for the second time and Dad bought me the plane I had asked for. When he went to the checkout counter to pay, Mom told him, "We have to be careful with these presents. Udi doesn't know when to stop."

"This one time it's alright if he doesn't know when to stop," Dad said, "he really is behaving like a little hero."

"Nevertheless," Mom insisted, "we have to put a limit on the price."

"Forget about money now," Dad told her.

This is the way it always is. Dad is always much more generous than Mom, maybe because he doesn't go to the supermarket every week and see how much we spend on food and other stuff. Mom is the one who does all the shopping, and she always worries that we'll run out of money.

Then we drove home. I ran outside to search for the members of the Gang. They weren't in our usual meeting place, they weren't in the yard, and they weren't at Moshik's house. I went over to the park to look for them, but I couldn't hear anybody's voice there, either. I began to worry. Maybe they had gone

to the hospital to practice the mission? Or maybe they had all changed their minds? Maybe they had gone to the beach with someone's parent, and they had forgotten all about me? Maybe maybe maybe....

I went outside and walked around, just kicking leaves. I was getting really uptight. Then all of a sudden I began to be afraid that the mission wouldn't be successful. Suddenly I began to fear that they wouldn't get to the hospital at all. And if they did get there, they wouldn't succeed in entering. And if they did succeed in entering, they wouldn't find the children's ward. And if they did find the children's ward, then you could bet that Dan would forget my clothes at home, and I couldn't escape and go outside and travel in a taxi in hospital pajamas. Everyone would see that I had run away from somewhere.

I couldn't find the Gang all afternoon. It was only at four p. m. when I called Moshik that I found him at home. He really hadn't been home in the morning, because everyone had met at Sagit's house, but he had returned in the afternoon.

Moshik got all excited when he heard my voice on the telephone. "Redhead!" he shouted, "what's happening with you? Did they already operate on you?"

"No," I said, "I'm not even in the hospital."

"Then where are you?"

"I'm at home," I said.

"At home?" Moshik asked, surprised. "In your own home?"

"Yes," I said, "the operation has been postponed until tomorrow."

He was quiet for a moment, as if he wanted to think about what I had said, and then he asked me:

"You want to tell me that you're really in your own house? In your house, next door to my house?"

"I've already told you twice," I said, "I'm home."

"Then why are you calling me?" Moshik asked.

"To let you know that the plan has been postponed for one day," I said.

"But why tell me on the telephone?" Moshik asked, "Why don't you come over and tell me yourself?"

I didn't have an answer for this. I myself didn't understand why I called him when we live next door to each other. What was even weirder, was that until Moshik had drawn my attention to the fact that it was strange that I was calling him from next door, I had no idea that I was doing something strange. I guess I really was afraid of the hospital and the operation and the rescue plan, otherwise, why would I be so mixed up?

Chapter Nine



The Commander – Hero of the Hospital

The next day I really entered the hospital. Once again I didn't eat breakfast, because you have to fast when you go into the operating room. Dad took another day off from work and drove Mom and me to the hospital. They gave me a bed in a big room with other kids, and this weird white robe that didn't look like pajamas at all. The nurse told me that I would wear this robe in the operating room, and when I left the operating room I would get normal pajamas.

Mom and Dad sat next to me. Mom's eyes were red. She was so excited that she she was actually crying. She didn't want me to see that she was crying, so she turned her face away from me. I looked around. In the bed to my right there was a boy about my age, and his entire leg was covered with a plaster cast. There was a little older boy in the bed on my

left. He didn't have any cast, neither on his leg nor his arm. I turned to him and asked what was wrong with him. He said that he was about to have an operation.

"Me too," I said.

The other boy smiled.

"Are you afraid?" he asked.

"You've got to be kidding!" I told him, "I'm not afraid of anything."

"Not even of injections?" he asked me.

"Injections are a big joke for me," I said.

I wanted to tell him that I was a wounded commander, and that my soldiers were planning a rescue mission. But I didn't feel right about this because of Mom and Dad. His parents weren't sitting next to the boy's bed. The thought entered my head that he might be an orphan. I asked him what his name was. He said his name was Ariel. I asked him where he lived, and he said that he lived in Kiryat Hayovel (that's another part of Jerusalem.)

"If they operate on you first," Ariel said to me, "then tell me exactly what it's like."

"And if they operate on you first," I said to Ariel, "then you tell me what it was like."

"I'll keep my fingers crossed for you," Ariel told me.

"And I'll keep mine crossed for you, too," I told him.

As a general rule, I don't like kids who are bigger

than I am, but I liked Ariel, since he admired me for my courage. I was really happy that he was in the bed next to me, but I was sorry that he lived so far away from me. If Ariel lived a little closer to Talpiot, I would have asked him to join our Gang. If we had enough money for a taxi to go both to Talpiot and Kiryat Hayovel, I would have asked him to escape together with me, tomorrow, when Plan Number Two would become operational.

We talked a little while longer, and then the nurse came to take me to the operating room. Now I began to be afraid a little, but I bit my lips so Ariel wouldn't see that I was afraid. Mom burst out crying and Dad calmed her down. The nurse transferred me onto a trolley and asked me how I felt.

"Great," I said, "just like all the commanders."

"Commanders?" she blurted out, surprised.

I heard Doctor Har-Even's voice behind me. "Didn't you know that he is a commander? Didn't you know that he is a heroic commander?" I lifted my head up and saw him next to the trolley. He shook my hand and promised me that everything would be alright. Then they wheeled me down the long corridor leading to the operating room, where they gave me something to put over my face. This thing that I put over my face had a strong smell, and when I breathed in, all of a sudden I became confused, and I didn't know where I was.

I don't know what happened after this. The only thing I know is that when I opened my eyes, I was

already back in my room, in the bed next to Ariel's, and Mom was still crying.

"What's going on here?" I asked, "why did they bring me back?"

Mom smiled.

"They're through," she said.

"What do you mean, they're through?" I asked.

"They're through with your operation," Mom said.

"They're through operating on me?" I couldn't believe it. "But I didn't feel anything."

"Of course you didn't feel anything," Mom said, "you were asleep."

The nurse brought me a cup of tea, and Mom put her hand under my back so I could drink. I drank slowly because I was a little dizzy. Then I lay back on my pillow. Ariel was sitting up in bed.

"Well?" he asked me, "how was it?"

"I have no idea," I told him.

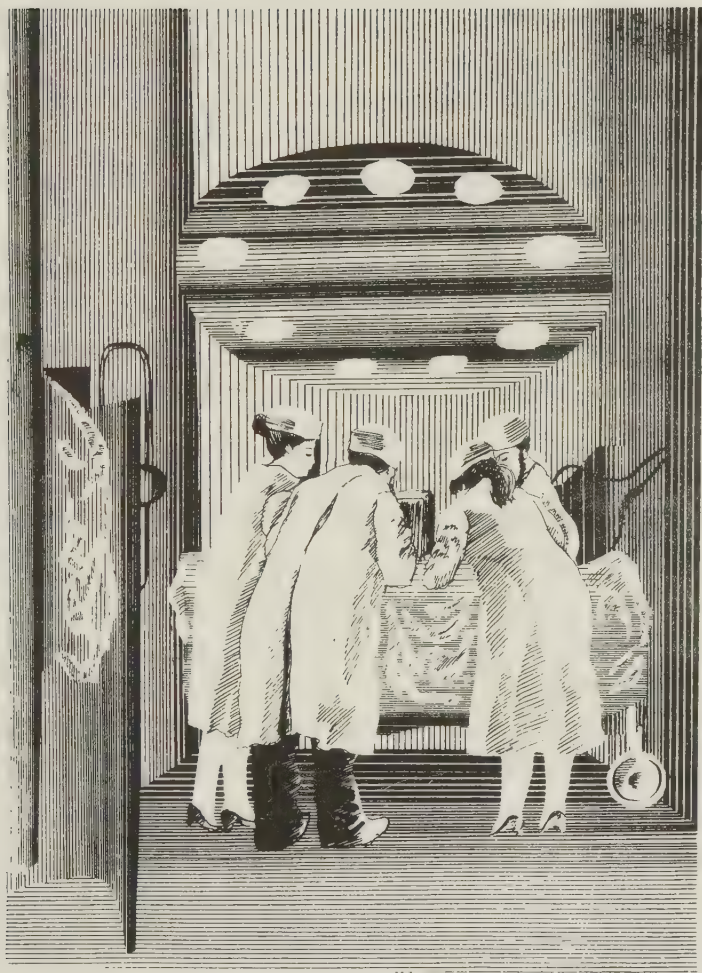
"What do you mean, you don't have any idea," he asked, "I mean, you were there."

"I was there, but I don't remember at all, because they did something to me," I said. "They gave me some kind of thing to put over my face, and then the next thing I knew I was back here in bed."

Ariel was amazed. "They took you from here more than an hour ago, and you don't remember anything?"

"No," I said.

"I hope that I don't remember anything, either," he said.



No sooner did he finish the sentence, than the nurse who had come to take me came and took him. He was gone from the room for an hour and a half, and his eyes were closed when he came back. When he finally opened his eyes, he didn't know where he was at all, and when I told Ariel that he was in a hospital, he asked me what he was doing in a hospital.

I didn't feel so great in the first hours after my operation, and I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to escape with my Gang. I was afraid that they would come and carry out the Operational Plan just as we had decided, but I would spoil everything, because I wouldn't be able to stand up. But when they brought me lunch, I felt better. I got off my bed and began to walk around. I wasn't dizzy at all.

And then Doctor Har-Even came and said:

"Hi! I can see that you're feeling alright."

"Yes," I said.

"If that's the case, I think that you can go home," Doctor Har-Even said.

I got all panicky. "What?" I shouted.

"You can go home," Doctor Har-Even said. There's no reason for us to keep you here if everything's OK and you feel better, and you can walk around."

"But ..." I said.

"What's the matter?" Doctor Har-Even asked.

"But you only operated on me today," I said.

"That's correct," he smiled, "But as I already

explained to you, this is a simple operation, and if there aren't any complications, you can go home the same day. You have a bed at home, and if you feel tired you can rest in your bed."

I thought to myself, what a mess! If I return home today, how will the Gang come to rescue me? How will they carry out Operational Plan Number Two? And besides, what will they think about me? They'll think that I underwent a simple operation which isn't fitting for a hero like me. They will think that I just put up a big front. That I exaggerated the whole affair all out of proportion. That I just wanted to impress them, so that they would look up to me. No! I'm not leaving the hospital today. I'll stay here until tomorrow, until they come and rescue me. I'm not willing to turn operations into a big joke. If I agreed to be operated on, then go ahead, but this has to be an operation like the operations other people undergo. I won't agree to be brought into the operating room in the morning, and to have them take me out of the hospital in the afternoon. What am I, some kind of clown?

I turned on my side and, at the same time, began to moan. Mom became frightened immediately.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I don't know," I answered, "all of a sudden there were these pains in my stomach, all of a sudden...."

Doctor Har-Even pulled back my blanket and examined my stomach. "I can't find anything wrong," he said.

"I can't move," I said.

"Let's take you home," Dad suggested, "you'll feel much beter at home."

"NO!!!" I screamed, "I don't want to go home. I want to stay here! I can't get up."

Mom and Dad exchanged looks.

"I'll carry you," Dad said.

"I don't want to be carried," I vetoed his suggestion. "I want to sleep here. I want to go home tomorrow."

Doctor Ha.-Even beckoned to Dad to go outside with him into the hall. Dad went out after him and they held a secret consultation near the door. Ariel looked at me. He was astonished. He didn't understand how any kid could want to stay in the hospital and wasn't willing to go home. I couldn't explain to Ariel what this was all about, because Mom was sitting next to me and she heard everything.

Then Doctor Har-Even and Dad returned and told me that if I wanted to stay in the hospital that much until tomorrow, then they were willing to let me stay. But if nothing hurt me, and I was just pretending that it hurt, this was an entirely different matter, because this would confuse the doctors. Besides which, if I were to stay here, I would have to stay by myself, since Mom couldn't stay to sleep next to me. So I had to decide whether to stay or go home.

I chose the first option, of spending the night in the hospital, without Mom, but I wasn't willing to admit

that nothing hurt me. What I mean is that it really hurt me. Where they sewed up the operation, it really hurt me, but the pain didn't spread all through my stomach, like I had said at the beginning.

Chapter Ten



The Rescue Team Arrives at the Hospital

I couldn't fall asleep at all during the night. I had never slept in a hospital during my entire life, and so I couldn't even guess how difficult it would be, especially without Mom. When I sleep at home I'm used to seeing Gil across the room. I recognize all the shadows on the walls and the sounds from outside. Everything's strange in the hospital. The kid lying in the bed next to mine is a stranger. The sounds coming in from the corridor, and especially the shadows on the wall, are all strange.

Ariel couldn't fall asleep either. He told me that he didn't have a father. His father was killed in a traffic accident two years ago, just when his mother was pregnant. Then his sister was born. Since there wasn't anybody else who could take care of his little sister, Ariel agreed to be brave and stay alone in the hospital.

"I'm leaving here tomorrow morning too," I told Ariel, "even before my parents come to take me."

He asked me, "Are you going by yourself?"

"No," I told him, "I'm going to be rescued."

"They're going to rescue you?" Ariel was amazed. "Who's going to rescue you?"

"My friends," I said.

"Your friends are going to rescue you?" He didn't understand. "Why do they have to rescue you?"

"This is a military mission," I told him. This is a sort of practice mission, so that if I'm ever arrested or taken prisoner, they will already be well-trained, and they'll know how to rescue me from our enemies."

"I can't understand a single word of what you're talking about," he said.

"I'm talking about a mission," I said.

"You're a weird kid," Ariel said, "I never ever heard of a kid who wants to be snatched from a hospital."

I laughed.

"Who says I'm a kid?" I asked him.

"You can tell by looking at you," he answered me.

"And what would you say if I were to tell you that you're not seeing straight, and that I'm really not a kid, but a Commander?"

Ariel pulled back his sheet and got out of bed. He came near my bed and took a good look at me.

"If you're not a kid," he asked, "then how come they put you in the children's ward?"

I laughed.

"Maybe I just disguised myself as a kid," I suggested.

"It's impossible to disguise yourself as a kid," Ariel said, "you can't shorten your height."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"Everybody knows that," he said.

"Alright," I agreed, I'm a kid. But I'm not just any ordinary kid. I'm a kid-Commander, and I have a platoon of soldiers who have remained at the front lines. Do you believe that?"

"No," he said.

"When they arrive here tomorrow and rescue me, then you'll see that you're wrong," I said. I was so angry at him for not believing what I told him that I turned my back on him and closed my eyes, and pretended to be asleep. Ariel moved away from my bed and went back to his own bed. Afterwards I heard him turning and tossing. A kid was crying in another ward, and the nurse was trying to calm him down. Why didn't I go home with Mom and Dad? Why did I have to give the Gang members the whole idea of rescuing me? Why did I have to stay here in this strange bed, instead of sleeping in my own bed?

I already thought to myself that the night would never end. But it did end, and when the sun came up the nurse came and took our temperatures. Then Doctor Har-Even came in and saluted me.

"How is the Commander?" he asked.

"Alright," I said, and looked out of the corner of



my eye at Ariel, who was astounded by Doctor Har-Even's salute.

"Did you sleep?" he asked me.

"Perfectly," I lied.

"And nothing hurts any more?" he asked.

"No, it doesn't hurt any more," I told him.

"Excellent," Doctor Har-Even said, "you can go home today. I'll just take a look at your stitches to see that everything is alright, and then you can get dressed. Your mother left your clothes here." He pulled up my pajama top and looked at the stitches, straightened out my pajama top, and said that everything was fine.

I thought to myself, just great! These grownups, they just have to spoil everything. Why did she have to leave me clothes? And why could I put them on? What was the use of our entire mission, if they were going to release me from the hospital today anyways? And why is Dan smuggling clothes for me, if I have other clothes here? I wanted them to see me like this, in the hospital pajamas, and now Doctor Har-Even says that I can get dressed! What a disappointment!

Doctor Har-Even left the room and Ariel sat up in bed.

"Why did he call you Commander?" he asked me.

I laughed. At least one thing had succeeded.

"I already explained that to you," I told him, "I'm a Commander. You didn't believe me, but I really am a Commander."

"And your friends are really going to rescue you?"

he asked. Now I sensed that there was a chance that he was beginning to believe me.

"That's obvious," I told him.

I took my clothes which were draped over the back of the chair. The stitches hurt me a little, so I had to walk bent over, but this wasn't so bad. On the contrary, walking stooped over made me look like a wounded Commander, and I liked looking like this. I went into the bathroom and carefully took off my pajamas and put on my clothes. Then I ate breakfast, and after the meal I went out into the corridor to wait for my troops.

But they didn't come. As luck would have it, Mom didn't come to take me home either. I went back into the room. I walked over to the window and looked out, at the lawn in front of the hospital. And then I saw them. They got off the bus just at the moment I came over to the window.

"Do you want to see something?" I asked Ariel.

"What?" he asked.

"Come over here, come over to the window and you'll be able to see my troops," I told him, with a lot of pride in my voice.

Ariel came over to the window. I pointed to the kids. They walked through the pedestrian area and stopped by one of the benches. Sagit took something out of her bag, and distributed it among the other kids. I saw them bending down. Ariel also saw them bending down.

He asked me, "What are they doing?"

"They're putting bandages on themselves," I said. I immediately realized that they had changed the plan a bit; instead of only Dan bandaging himself up, they all were putting bandages on themselves.

"Why are they doing that?" Ariel asked, surprised.

"So that they'll look wounded, and they'll be permitted to enter the children's ward," I told him.

He looked at me, full of admiration.

"I see you're really a professional team," he said.

"Didn't I tell you so?" I asked

"You told me," he admitted.

The kids finished bandaging themselves, and I tore myself away from the window and went towards the corridor, to wait for them there. Ariel went back to his bed. I think that he was beginning to be jealous now. I think that now he was also beginning to believe that I really was a Commander in wars. And I think something else. I think that when he goes back to Kiryat Hayovel he'll tell all his friends about the amazing kid who was lying in the bed next to his in the hospital, a kid who wasn't afraid of his operation, who slept like a log at night, and in the morning his troops came and rescued him in a lightning raid.

Chapter Eleven



SNAFU *

When I went into the corridor I could hear the voices of my friends coming up from below. They apparently were arguing with the security guards, who didn't want to let them come up. The head nurse of the ward saw me walking around wearing clothes, and asked if I was going home. I nodded yes. When I planned this mission, I was positive that I would have to hide from the nurses and the doctors, and here I was, walking around, free as a bird. No one told me to go back to bed, no one reprimanded me, and no one admired me for getting up on my own two feet too early.

Nevertheless, I walked flush against the wall, as if I were hiding from somebody. If most of the

SNAFU is a term that soldiers use to describe something that's all messed up. The letters stand for Situation Normal, All Fouled Up.

Operational Plan had been spoiled, this was no reason to ruin it all. Larry, Dan, Sagit, Yifat, and Moshik didn't know that I could already get up and go home. They were certain that I had to stay in the hospital for at least another week. So why should I tell them they were wrong? Why should I mess up the mission on which they had worked so hard?

I drew closer to the stairs and bent over, so that no one would see me. A doctor went by me and saw me like this, all bent over. He gave me this kind of look, as if he didn't understand what I was doing. Then I heard the sound of running footsteps. Someone was coming up the stairs, and somebody else was shouting to him from the ground floor:

"Don't be afraid! We're covering you!"

The one who was running on the stairs said, "You can rely on me," and I immediately recognized the voice. It was Dan.

I made myself as small as possible. Dan kept on running up the stairs. I stood up when he went past me. What a confused kid! He didn't even realize that it was me who was bent over next to the stairs, and that was why he didn't stop when he ran past me.

"Hey!" I called out in a whisper, "Dan!"

"Redhead!" he called out, "what are you doing here?"

"I wanted to save you some trouble," I said, "I succeeded in escaping from the nurses."

He looked me over from top to bottom, and then looked at the wall. Then he turned his stare back on

me.

"You're wearing regular clothes," he said, "how come you have regular clothes?"

"I succeeded in getting to the clothes I wore when I arrived here," I told him. "The nurse hid them, but I managed to open the closet and take them out."

He looked confused.

"Did they operate on you?" he asked.

"Of course," I said.

"Then how come you look like this, normal?"

I lifted my shirt and let him look at my scar through the bandage that Doctor Har-Even had put on. Dan whistled through his teeth, amazed.

"What an operation!" he called out.

"Shhhh..." I said, "we have to sneak out of here."

"You can rely on me," Dan said, "the Gang is covering us. Can you run?"

"No," I said.

"Then we'll walk slowly," Dan said. "We'll pretend that we're coming to visit someone." He bent over his leg in order to remove the bandage which he had wound around it, but the bandage wasn't on his leg.

"It must have fallen off," he said.

"Forward!" I commanded.

We began to walk down the stairs. Dan looked cautiously to the right and left all the time. When we reached the next floor, Sagit jumped out from a corner and joined us, to provide cover. After her, Moshik joined us; he had hidden in a bathroom. Then Larry and Yifat joined us; they had hidden

behind a bench on the first floor. We walked along quietly, as if we had just come to visit someone. No one looked at us. People went up and down the stairs, and they couldn't care less that right under their noses a rescue mission was in progress, with three boys and two girls rescuing another boy who had undergone an operation only the day before, and already was wearing street clothes, as if nothing had happened.

Everything went perfectly until we left the hospital building, but everything went wrong once we got outside. Just at the very second that we entered the mall in front of the hospital building, Dad's car pulled up, and he and Mom got out, in order to take me home.

"What do we do?" Sagit called out, since she saw them first. "Here are your parents. Now they'll grab us redhanded!"

"Tell them that you came to visit me," I immediately ordered under my breath, "pretend that you're just going for a walk with me here."

"I'm sure your mother will go tell my mother what I did," Moshik said.

Mom saw me from a distance.

"Udi!" she called to me. "Are you already dressed? Are you all ready to go? I see that everyone has come to accompany you home!"

She came near us, walking fast, and excitedly hugged me. "Did you manage to sleep at night?" she asked.



What a messup! The Gang members gave me questioning looks and I couldn't explain to them what happened, because I didn't want Mom to know about the rescue plan. Mom gave Moshik a puzzled look because of his bandaged leg. Then she looked at Sagit and Larry, who also were bandaged in exactly the same place. I couldn't explain to her how come they were all wounded, because this too was connected with the rescue plan. I looked at all of them, totally mixed up. Nothing even resembling a plan could emerge from the fog inside my brain.

We stood like that, quiet and all confused, for a few minutes, until Dad said:

"What, are you all wounded?"

"No," Moshik said (since he usually doesn't know how to lie.)

"Then why are you all bandaged?" Dad asked.

I quickly said, "Those aren't bandages," because I didn't rely on Moshik to come up with a good answer. "This is part of our uniforms. It's something secret."

Dad smiled.

"I think it would be a good idea if this entire banadaged platoon were to get inside the station wagon and wait there until I complete all the paperwork for release from the hospital," he said.

"What release are you talking about?" Moshik and Yifat asked at the same time.

"Udi's release from the hospital," he said.

Larry asked, "The Redhead is being released from the hospital today?"

“Certainly,” Dad replied. “He could have been released yesterday, but he insisted on staying. We’ve come now to take him home.”

This could have been an extremely embarrassing situation, but as you can probably guess, I managed to come out the victor, as always. I immediately told the other kids that my body displayed extraordinary qualities, and underwent the operation so well that doctors even came from other hospitals to see this great medical wonder. Since I recovered so quickly, the doctors decided that I could go home immediately after the operation, which doesn’t happen as a general rule. But I didn’t want to spoil their mission, and that was why I remained in the hospital. Besides, the boy in the bed next to mine, who’s named Ariel, didn’t believe that my friends were capable of rescuing me from the hospital. So I had to stay in order to show him how brave my friends are. In the morning, when he saw them in action, he was really awestricken, and he began to believe me.

That was that. Dad finished all the paperwork in the hospital, bought us all ice cream, and invited everyone to come over and play with me. After all, it was only yesterday that I had undergone an operation, and I still couldn’t run around outside. Besides which, Dad told them, Udi has a new laser gun and airplane, both with remote control, and it would be a lot of fun playing with them. Then we drove home, and I got into bed, because my stomach

really started hurting me. Moshik, Larry, and Dan played with my laser gun and airplane, and Sagit and Yifat sat and watched.

A Last Word

I'm very curious to know what your parents will say to you after you tell them what you read in this book. I'm sure that they will have some criticism.

First of all, some parents will criticize my Mom and Dad. Why? Because they tried to bribe me with prizes, and I know that there are many parents who totally oppose things like this. They think that if a kid has to undergo an operation, you have to prepare him and cheer him up, but certainly not to give him a present for every little thing. Why? Because prizes just lead to more shakedowns, and besides, the operation is for the child's benefit, so why should he get a prize, too? Of course, these parents will use me as an example. They'll say, here's proof. The Redhead wasn't at all afraid of the tests, and he would have behaved properly even without a prize. He pretended in order to get the prize, and pretending is lying. The

prize just caused the Redhead to lie.

Let me tell you, you're completely wrong! It's true that I'm not a crybaby and taking blood doesn't scare me, but even brave children are scared sometimes if they don't receive encouragement. And how do you encourage kids? The best way is to give them a reason to be brave, because everyone in the whole world likes to do things if there's a reason for them. If you don't get anything out of being brave, then why should you be brave? Even IDF soldiers get a medal when they do something especially brave, so why shouldn't a nine-year-old kid get something like this?

So much for the criticism of my parents. I'm sure that there are other parents who will be critical of me. Why? Because, as usual, I'm irresponsible, and, as usual, love to make things up, and if I really had to stay in the hospital for another week, then the rescue operation might have ended in a real tragedy.

You can tell these parents, and tell them for me, that, first of all, I'm sick and tired of hearing that I'm irresponsible. There are kids who are even less responsible than I am, and besides, responsibility is not for kids, except for crossing streets and things like that. Second, I've already explained to you that imaginary things and adventures only add to life. You can just imagine, for example, what would happen if I didn't have any imagination. Dad would come to me and tell me that I had to undergo an operation. How would I respond? Right away I'd start to cry and be afraid, and I might even run away from

home. And then if Mom and Dad had to chase me, and finally caught me, then they'd have to bring me to the hospital by force. Do you think that would be so pleasant? I don't think so. I think it's much nicer to enter the hospital of your own free will, and to act the way I acted, even if this involves a rescue mission.

That's what I have to say to your parents. There's something else I wanted to tell you. I hope you aren't smothering your imagination. I wouldn't want a single kid in the entire world to have a boring life, without any imagination at all.

Bye for now.



Who's been in the hospital?

I have!

Who was terribly afraid before he went for an operation in the hospital?

I was!

Who overcame his fear and pretended as if he was a courageous hero?

I did!

Do you know that you can turn a stay in the hospital into an exciting adventure? Do you know that someone who pretends to be a courageous hero, or who acts as if he isn't afraid, really does become a hero, and everybody admires him?

Do you want to know exactly how this happened? Do you want to learn some special tricks? You can read all about my adventure in this book.

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